

## LYNN HERSHMAN'S *ELECTRONIC DIARIES*

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In some ways Lynn Hershman is the mother of us all. Her prolific artist career encompasses the entire range of the contemporary arts, from installation pieces in public places, establishing alternative venues and artistic institutions, documentary and fiction feminist video production, and pioneering computer art installations all made from a feminist perspective.

The work of Hershman that I am focusing on today are two of her *Electronic Diaries*, tapes that feature her direct address to the camera about her own thoughts and analysis of her life. The works in the *Electronic Diary* series, starting in the mid 1980s and continuing to the present, are each shot over many sessions, usually at home or in her office at work, and edited chronologically. In them she sets out quite explicitly a model of women's consciousness and its relation to historical process. She has also made many other tapes, mostly fictional, which deal with the same issues in a refracted disjunctive way. Interestingly, the *Electronic Diaries*, with their blunt explanation of her own psychological process, offer a direct aesthetic explanation of her other work. [Show about the first eight minutes of FIRST PERSON PLURAL]

In an interview Lynn Hershman stated that her work is about the "internal structure of the mediated psyche fleshed out as the female body." Literary theorist Peter Brooks calls such a condensed and enigmatic statement a collapsed metaphor, one which needs a whole narrative to expand and thus in some way explain it. I am hoping this talk will show what it means for an artist to make many works which reveal how the mediated psyche of our whole culture has been for ages fleshed out as the female body.

Here I am specifically looking at H's work in the context of another paper I gave, which some of you may have heard, about the rape threat scene in narrative cinema. I have a series of questions that I am looking at in Hershman's work that intersect with the questions I raised in that other paper although H's work is much broader and more interesting than these questions perhaps indicate.

1. Why are women so often drawn to narratives, often presented in a confessional or melodramatic form, which tell stories of family abuse, rape, battery, and the torture and murder of women? In other words, why across the centuries does a Jack the Ripper grip women's fantasies as both something horrific and offering a frisson that makes us return to hear such stories again and again. Some of us have experienced sexual violence and battery, some haven't, yet the stories seem to have currency among all of us.
2. How are women-centered narratives of this violence different from the ordinary cinematic violence which leave the bodies of women littered across the screen, or a

violence against women that is used to motivate or explain the male protagonist? I am thinking here of films like *CLOCKWORK ORANGE*, *DEATH WISH*, and *TAXI DRIVER*.

3. In their formal aspects, what do the genres of autobiography and melodrama have to contribute to our potential identification with, pleasure in, or psychic use of such stories of violence against ourselves?

In her *Electronic Diaries*, Lynn Hershman lays out the answers to some of these formal and personal questions so bluntly that I think her very completeness is why she has been neglected by feminist theorists and activists. Her work is also interpreted by art world critics in a way that consistently overlooks what she so emphatically says in the *Electronic Diaries* in a direct address mode, that women's consciousness itself is shaped by our living in a violent world, and that there is an ever present connection between the abuse of women and our perceptions, behavior, and art.

In one sense Lynn Hershman is heir to the romantic tradition of looking inward to the self to express the one's innermost, unarticulated feelings, especially to express the wounds, loss, and incompleteness that occupy our souls. From Rousseau's *Confessions* to the present, this has been the prerogative and often goal of the petit-bourgeois white male intellectual and artist. Heirs to this tradition both formally and emotionally, women and artists from dispossessed groups have used the tactics of the romantic artist to give voice to what had been voiceless in their environments, to provide especially for their group the open and public articulation of these other subjectivities which are the dominant culture systematically denies and silences.

The male romantic hero's inward quest, I would remind you, was one of melancholy and restlessness. His pose was usually that of the wounded and self-destructive outsider who strove to enhance his knowledge and creativity by exploring his senses and articulating his unique sensibility. His behavior was often that of arising out of semiparalysis and cultural ennui to create something in a self destructive way, like that of a moth to a flame.

Women have taken up the romantic artist's quest, arising out of culturally induced paralysis to look inward and express themselves, with a whole different tenor. Their motives, tactics, and results are completely different from their male forbears or counterpart. The social force behind women's psychic exploration is best articulated for me by Adrienne Rich's metaphor, "Diving into the Wreck." And I should like to quote a bit from that poem, since Rich was one of the mothers of us all in the women's movement of the seventies and eighties: [Cite end of poem].

Now here is Lynn Hershman's version of the same project, women's mining of the self and its social reason [Citation from tapes: #1, just before end of FIRST PERSON PLURAL].

Lynn Hershman's work was ahead of its time. In the mid 80s Chris Straayer, then working at the Video Data Bank, told me about it, but I avoided it as potentially too direct, something that was so blunt it would scorch by its directness and completeness. I

could only return to write about violence to women and what it means to us all after the Anita Hill testimony at the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, a moment I think that marked a new public awareness, especially among women, of the hostility of our whole culture to women's perceptions and women's lives. In *BINGE* Hershman deals with a forty pound weight gain she went through after her husband just walked out on her with no previous warning. She loses, then gains, then loses weight again in the course of this diary tape, mostly composed from the head up. As a fat woman I find her honesty and political reflections on fatness as uncomfortable as I find them illuminating, and perhaps it is just too close to home for me to analyze here. Anyway, in that tape she gives an often quoted summary statement of much of the art that she has produced in her career. [Citation #2, from *BINGE*, noting the bifurcation of the image into halves, fourths, sixteenths, etc.]

Critics have interpreted these lines, this bifurcating image as a distancing of the viewer from the producer's self so that Hershman's self becomes unknowable, especially since in a later moment she says the knowledge came from the various voices or personae within her. But the lines about simulation, fiction, facsimiles, and faction leads to a plea for ending all distortions of truth and value, especially tied to women's body distortions, masochism, and self abuse.

In *FIRST PERSON PLURAL*, Lynn Hershman directly explains what this process of splitting and fragmenting in the psyche entails for women, what feminine masochism is, its origins, and its ways of getting worked out,-- in bodily symptoms, in self-destructive behavior, in abuse of the next generation, or directly voicing its mechanisms over and over again. Hershman tells us about her multiple personae or discrete aspects of self, and in some of her most painful lines, "You're not supposed to talk about it," we hear the voice of the intact child within her speaking directly to the camera. It is astounding to me that none of the writers I have read on her could comment on her courage in such a performance especially since she comments directly on her tone of voice's meaning.

A victim of child sexual abuse and battery, H. also talks about the destructive choices she made as an adult, choices articulated directly in the first version of her diary tape, *CONFESSIONS OF A CHAMELEON*, and in many of her semi-autobiographical fiction tapes of the same period. In *FIRST PERSON PLURAL*, she says, "I began to link myself to destructive people, especially drawn to them like a magnet, as if I was trying to recreate those episodes but not know it. But they knew it."

I had earlier asked the question of why these narratives of victimization appeal to women, now on daytime talk shows and for the last several centuries, in melodrama. At this point I would like to posit several answers and elicit a discussion from you that might expand on my understanding of the mechanisms here:

1. As women, we are all vulnerable to rape and sexual harassment. If the boy's route to maturity is to expunge the feminine from himself and become the heir to culture and a future mom/wife as he enters into the symbolic realm, the girl is heir to rape culture and the domestic sphere. At what age do we learn about rape threat, three or four or five. It may not be taught in explicitly sexual terms, but girls are taught very young about the

dangers of public space. The boy who expunges the feminine from himself is not only warding off a fear of castration, he also never has to feel, as all girls are TAUGHT to feel, the fear of rape, the rape threat that exists as soon as a shadow crosses ours or a footstep comes up behind us in public space. We identify with stories of battery and rape because of rape consciousness which is an integral part of our lives.

2. As women inherit the symbolic and emotional realm of the domestic sphere, they inherit the actual labor of ego tending, of observing and managing emotional relationships. Here I draw on the work of Nancy Chodorow, and much of what she has to say is applicable to explaining why melodrama has an appeal to women. She sees the domestic sphere as multigenerational, the socially sanctioned world of emotional expression, a world of connectiveness that is supposed to be nurturing. There are ties between mother and child that mothers and daughters find especially difficult to sever. And as all of us who are students of melodrama know, the emotional burdens placed on domestic relations are too much for any home to bear, so that anger and frustration often hysterically erupt.

3. These two aspects of women's lives make stories of abuse fascinating to women. Women and girls fantasize about the threat that lies in parents, especially fathers abusing children, in going out on the street, especially 'unprotected,' and in all heterosexual relations, especially if as Lynn Hershman says, a woman who was abused may make bad sexual choices over and over again. If I get a good man, I know that is just my winning the lottery. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce; so the story of a battered woman tells the female viewer, "There but for the grace of God go I." In fact, stories of battery and rape provide the female viewer the masochistic frisson of heterosexuality itself, heterosexuality as an institution. That is, as long as my sexual object choice has more social power than I do, and this is a systematic aspect of the structure of desire, feminine identifications with stories of abuse make sense.

Finally, and here is where I think Lynn Hershman is most powerful, and potentially most difficult for feminist thinkers and activists around issues of incest to accept, is her understanding of, partial identification with, and even compassion for the oppressor. No one has commented on the fact that for the last thirty years it has been especially Jewish women who have gotten involved with theorizing pornography, sexual oppression, and women's sexual stake in sadomasochistic sexuality: They do not say the same things but think of the list: the feminist poet and theorists of the 'lesbian continuum' among women, Adrienne Rich; the leader of the feminist antipornography movement, Andrea Dworkin; philosopher Sandra Bartky who wrote "The Phenomenology of Masochism"; s & m theorist and apologist, who also wrote 'The Traffic in Women,' Gayle Rubin; and feminist experimental filmmaker, currently working on a feature film about a woman who is an adult survivor of incest, Michelle Citron.

My mother was Jewish and I was born in 1939. I came to consciousness hearing women's voices in the domestic sphere talking about concentration camps. My own childhood understanding of torture came to me when in infantile sadism, my brother and sister and I would cut worms in half to see both halves move. I consciously always understood the connection between myself and concentration camp torture. With a

similar understanding, Lynn Hershman talks about her own childhood abuse in terms of an explicit parallel with the Holocaust and Hitler's youth as a battered child. [long citation from FIRST PERSON PLURAL, noting images of Hitler on the visual track]

Lynn Hershman explains what is to be gained by understanding the mentality of the oppressor and even identifying with it in an open way. Masochism, especially in its garden variety among women, lets us claim our right to feeling and desire through indirection-- it may be through purging and bingeing, sadomasochistic fantasies, or just always falling in love with the wrong person. For Hershman, to know the mentality of the oppressor is to claim the power of his lust, the right to feel and pursue desire directly, openly. It is also to see in men what their less fractured and less other-directed egos never allow them to see. Contemporary novelist Jane Smiley ends her novel *A THOUSAND ACRES* with one of her woman character's final insights. This character, without ever being able to communicate it to others, comes to understand her incestuous father's mind and to claim that knowledge as her own: "I can't say that I forgave my father," she thinks, "but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember--the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, wrapping him in an unpenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all others."

The possibility that women readers will understand and identify with Smiley's final 'gleaming shard,' with all its phallic implications, can be explained by what Mary Ann Doane and Janet Bergstrom and others have written about as the multiple subject positions that women can occupy in interpreting fiction. Women can identify with different characters and points of view both successively and simultaneously. The psychoanalytic work commonly cited in feminist writings on women viewers' and readers' capacity for imagining all the roles is Freud's 'A Child is Being Beaten' Here Freud notes that a boy's fantasies about parental abuse give the boy a sense of mastery by letting him watch from a distance and identify with the aggressor. Girls, he notes, use masochistic fantasies to gain mastery over the abusive scene as they simultaneously watch from the outside, and from the inside, with a sense of participatory identification.

In contrast to the kind of control that women get from masochistic fantasies, and concurrently from watching melodramas and tales of aggression against women, male fantasies worked out in common movie and television scenes of violence rely on the female figure being always available as a blank slate, to be projected and acted upon. This most common variety of media violence against women is what Lynn Hershman calls the culture's "mediated psyche fleshed out as the female body." Hershman finally posits a kind of understanding and victory over masochism that comes from understanding and taking the subject position of the oppressor.

And this violent imaging is very different from the ordinary film characterization of the murderer and rapist: Hershman, and Smiley whom I just cited, let the abused woman see the abuser exactly for who he is. He is not a blank slate to her to project upon, but he is understood in a way he does not understand himself. What the woman now claims is the aggressor's, the man's, right to direct access to desire, indeed to lust.

One of the reasons, I think, that Lynn Hershman's understanding of abuse not been used a lot in the women's movement nor acknowledged by art critics writing on her work is that she articulates a very complex and complete way of looking at how women understand men's follies and also how they participate sometimes masochistically, sometimes cunningly, and sometimes in a self-satisfying way in a modern world which is constructed according to male fantasies.

In closing, I would like to run through a few of the feminist discourses around sexuality from the past three decades and point out where Lynn Hershman's honesty shows up the denial and gaps in these discourses: The women against pornography movement wanted to find an expungable other, an easily removable source of male violence. It denies the role of violent fantasy in the most ordinary childhood and adult sexual experiences, and also denies the usefulness of masochism, the economy of masochism in most women's lives.

Similarly there is psychological movement, especially popular on the west coast, that wants us to reclaim our inner child. But it does not explain the most common genesis of a separate child persona in [mostly girls'] too early sexual awakening. And, thus it denies gender differences in these inner child figurae, telling men they have to do this with the same kind of urgency. Furthermore, this movement seeks to reclaim a very vanilla child and not a masochistic, sadistic, or sexually savvy one.

In contrast, the lesbian s & m movement recognizes this woman's sexualized child but rarely articulates the relation of incest to adult sadomasochistic practices, especially among women. If writers like Gayle Rubin or Pat Califia could make explicit the relation of a chosen sexual practice to incest and rape survival, they could write about s & m for what it so often is, a way of recuperating a rape and incest culture for women.

And finally, the survivors of incest movement stress confronting the oppressor. In their literature, they do not acknowledge that all women's adult sexuality, perhaps especially that of women who have suffered abuse, is always and ever an outgrowth of the old experience, something that has to be reclaimed for better as well as for worse.

Lynn Hershman's *Electronic Diaries*, like romantic art, emphasize feeling. But it is a women's experience of feeling being articulated for a social reason: "We learn to transcend the role by feeling it more," she says. "And how we do that can affect the legacy for the next generation."